

BOOK REVIEW

BRADBURY FLEXES LITERARY MUSCLES

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Science fiction master Ray Bradbury is about the last person you might expect to name a book after a line in the romantic film *Casablanca*. And yet there it is staring you in the face: *We'll Always Have Paris*, his new collection of short stories.

Where are all the aliens? Where are the killer, mechanical hounds?

They are nowhere to be found in this pleasant compilation of previously unpublished stories by the 88-year-old author. Instead, Bradbury fills the book with tales that are often eerie and disturbing but more nostalgic than futuristic, more Humphrey Bogart than Captain Kirk.

WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS.

By Ray Bradbury; William Morrow. 224 pages. \$24.99.

To those with more than just a casual interest in Bradbury, this will come as no surprise. During the course of his long and celebrated career, he's tried his hand at much more than science fiction, including detective novels and children's books.

The 21 short stories and one poem in *We'll Always Have Paris* were conceived over the course of Bradbury's life and seem to reflect the author's practice of sitting down every day to write like clockwork — every day a new beginning, fresh and untinted by the previous day's work.

How else to explain stories so far-ranging in subject and tone? There is a dog that seems to take confession in "Pater Caninus," and a husband who takes on the manner of speech of whatever book he's reading in "A Literary Encounter." And yes, there's even a story about the first humans adjusting to life on Mars.

What unifies the book is the beauty of Bradbury's language. In the introduction to the collection, he elaborates a little on his writing process, explaining, "I haven't thought about any of these stories; they are explosions or impulses." You can feel that as you make your way through it.

Sometimes the result is breathtaking. You can feel his passion as he throws words onto the page and they come together in just the right way, as they do in "Last Laughs" when he writes: "we insucked-outblew firecracker bomb-blasts of hilarity like boys on a forgotten summer day, collapsed on the sidewalk, writhing with comic seizures of wild upchuck heart attacks."

Sometimes, however, Bradbury's eruptions of thought bring a story into the world before it is fully formed. In "The Murder," he embarks on a promising tale about a man who bets another that nothing could lead him to commit murder but reaches the foregone conclusion too quickly. Other tales make you wonder if Bradbury is exercising his writing muscles simply for the sake of it.

The strongest work here deftly mixes optimism with melancholy. In "Massinello Pietro," Bradbury contrasts an old man's singing, full of joy for life, with the silence of his neighbors who complain to the cops.

There's a certain sweetness to many of these stories, even in the ones that describe human frailties. Some of them will linger and provoke thought — or at least a smile. Others will be forgotten with a quick turn of the page.

None of that matters to Bradbury. When it comes to his creations, he asks just one thing of readers: "Don't think about them too much. Just try to love them as I love them."

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